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A
SERMON,
PREACHED AT THE
CONSECRATION
OF A
CHAPEL at CRADLEY

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND THE
LORD BISHOP of WORCESTER,

ON
WEDNESDAY the 12th of SEPTEMBER,
1798,

BY THE
Rev. JOHN PLUMPTRE, M. A.
PREBENDARY OF THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF WORCESTER, AND
VICAR OF STONE, AND WICHENFORD.

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BY JOHN BACCHUS, M.A.

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TO
MR. TOWNSHEND,
Of CRADLEY,
AND TO
THE OTHER GENTLEMEN,

To whose meritorious exertions that very populous neighbourhood is indebted for an additional place of worship, upon the principles of the Church of England,—this Discourse, published at the request of persons much too respectable to be disregarded, is inscribed by

Their very humble Servant,

JOHN PLUMPTRE.

STONE,
September 17th, 1798.

N. B. *It may be proper to inform the reader, if he is unacquainted with the circumstance, that the Chapel at Cradley was originally designed for, and has hitherto been used by, a Set of Independents;—who are now, for the most part, become members of the Established Church.*

SERMON.

MATTHEW xviii. 20.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

IT was the assertion of a judicious Heathen,*
“ that no nation, however barbarous and
“ unenlightened, had yet ever been disco-
“ vered, which entertained not some persua-
“ sion of a God.”—The remark was probably
well founded in his time ; but we know that
we are able to continue evidence in support of
it, from the experience of eighteen hundred
years succeeding him.—We can even add to
this ; and can affirm, that as the latest and
best authenticated discoveries of the remotest,
and most insulated, parts of the globe, seem
sufficiently to confirm the former observation,

* Inter homines gens nulla est tam fera, quæ non sciat Deum esse
habendum, &c.

CICERO, i. de Leg.

so also, scarce a single discovery has been made, where the practice of erecting certain edifices, and of instituting certain ceremonies, for the worship of their Deity, has not prevailed.—We speak here only as to the fact.

For the expediency of such appointments, we appeal to reason, and to a competent acquaintance with human nature. Experience proves in what manner external circumstances frequently produce internal impressions; and that objects of sense can very powerfully affect and regulate mental dispositions.—Thus, how true soever it may be, that limits cannot contain the Deity;—that exclusively he cannot be present any where; that the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands, neither is worshipped with hands, as though he needeth any thing;* though this, I say, be true, yet it is also true, that, for human purposes, we are constrained to assign him local habitations; and that the power of these to promote religious sentiment is great and undeniable.—Witness the effects produced upon our minds when we merely enter holy places, magnificently constructed, adorned, and furnished, for God's honour and service;—witness those, which even in their rudest form

* Acts xvii. 24.

affect us piously by their simplicity; or by their silence awfully impress our feelings with the sacredness of their design and application.

Of these topics, however, I avail myself no farther, than just to remind you by the mention of them, that such invariably has been the practice of all mankind;—such the utility of the practice, as a sensible promoter of pious actions, and devout affections;—and for an authority, I refer you to the most superb and costly pattern of the kind, built by God's immediate direction, for his own namesake, among the Jews.

It becomes us rather to contemplate the occasion of our present assembling for a Christian purpose, upon Christian principles.

I shall therefore consider the import of the text, first, as it is in itself; secondly, as affording argument and exhortation towards local communion among Christians; and shall conclude with a few observations particularly adapted to the circumstances of this day's solemnity.

First then, as to the text itself, without going in quest of various explanations upon the subject of Christ's personal presence, we may be very sure that the declaration it contains, is not an unimportant one, nor a delusive

one;—that it is not an unmeaning intimation insignificantly held forth by Jesus Christ,—that where a number of persons worshipping the same God, and professing the same faith, are assembled in his name, there is He in the midst of them.

St. Matthew's Gospel, we all know, contains much more of Hebrew allusion, and of Hebrew idiom, than any other: and accordingly, the expression in the text has been supposed by able commentators to bear a near resemblance to, and to have its foundation in, a saying* familiar among the Jews, that “where two persons are seated together in conversation on the law, the Shekinah is between them.”

The promise, indeed, in the text, is emphatically given by Christ to his own particular disciples. But the application, in consistence with the context, and with other passages of Scripture, seems unavoidably to extend much farther; to their successors, and to the whole Church after them:—as if he had said,—“Wheresoever the smallest congregation shall at any time be assembled in my name,—for prayer, for discipline, or for any other good

* *Trita est inter Hebræos sententia,—Ubi duo consistunt sermonem habentes de Lege, Shekinah est inter ipsos.*

GROTIUS, in loc.

purpose

“ purpose of my Church,—there am I in
 “ the midst of them ;—there am I, ready to
 “ second their endeavours, to favour their pe-
 “ titions,—as the common advocate of the
 “ Christian Church, whereof I am ever the
 “ conductor, the head, and the preserver.”

That this is the true meaning of the whole passage taken together seems to be undeniable : a sense perfectly correspondent with Christ's office and character, in other parts of Scripture ;—and that we therefore run no risk of being misled, if we rely upon it.—“ Hitherto,” says our Saviour, in another place,* “ ye have
 “ asked nothing in my name ; ask, and ye
 “ shall receive ; that your joy may be full.”—St. Paul assures us, that Christ is able to save them for evermore, that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them ;† and our Lord's final declaration to his Apostles is,—“ Lo ! I am with you
 “ always, even unto the end of the world.”‡

Here therefore we may safely leave the argument, and from this interpretation follow the consequences.—In conformity to which, the doctrine we derive from it, is briefly this ; that for all the purposes of Christian commu-

* John xvi. 24.—† Heb. vii. 25.—‡ Matth. xxviii. 20.

nication, and Christian expectation ;—for all the benefits to be derived to mankind through Jesus Christ, He is ever specially in the midst of his faithful followers, present in power, which is true and effectual presence, as true and as effectual as if visible to our perceptions, —aiding and supporting the good purposes of those, who are assembled in his name.

And is it not a source of infinite satisfaction, should it not be the source of our most thankful acknowledgment, thus to have the assurance of a mediator between God and ourselves,—Christ Jesus?—Who is willing, and not only disposed, but able also, to perform all good offices for those who are assembled in his name? Whose good pleasure it is, to take part in our weaknesses, errors, and imperfections ; to convey to us through his own ministry, and that of the Holy Spirit, those sanctifying graces, which make us pleasing in God's sight ;—to procure reception for our prayers ; to give support to our resolutions, strength to our persuasions, virtue to our practice ; and, upon the whole, to confer on us all the means of our salvation, all the blessings and everlasting benefits of his Father's kingdom?

2.—The inferences derived from hence conduct us obviously to all that can be urged
in

in favour of local communion, and mutual co-operation in spiritual concerns, among Christians;—that we may place ourselves in a situation to receive those benefits, whereof a promise is peculiarly made to them, who assemble in Christ's name.

For whatever spiritual good effects may individually be expected from the solitary performance of Christian duties;—or however certainly in the way of salvation, all good Christians may be assured they must be, who are good Christians under any circumstances, for their own sakes;—yet, constituted as the world is, for the benefit of mankind at large, and for the interests of the Christian faith, something more is required from professed Christians;—and more than in the former case is actually charged upon them in the holy Scriptures. Public profession of Christianity is a duty belonging to professed Christians, as well as the private exercise and apprehension of the Christian doctrine:—and for the weightiest of all reasons, general as well as particular, civil as well as spiritual, besides the command of Scripture, and the example of all Christian ages, such a public profession of Christianity is at all times to be upheld among us:—that our equal obligations may together be acknowledged

knowledged to our equal Creator;—that our universal Saviour may universally be attested by a public declaration of our faith to him;—that an united intercourse may be preserved with the Holy Spirit, the promoter of our united expectations in Christ Jesus;—that in concert we may offer up our prayers, with one voice unite in praise; with one confession of our common infirmities we may acknowledge our common sins, and implore common forgiveness; that by a consent of inclination, a regularity of design, a consistency of faith, and hope, and fear, we may extend Christ's kingdom upon earth in the way He has appointed, as the common interest, and for the united happiness, of all mankind.

The most effectual means of contributing to which end, has been the judicious and very ancient appointment of Christian Churches:—Church Edifices, I mean, with all the proper requisites for a ministry of legal authority, and national institution.*

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* If less than this be deemed sufficient to define a Church of Christ,—that is, “ If the assembling of people together in a house to worship God, “ makes that house, and that assemblage, a Church of Christ, then, Christ “ may have as many Churches as there are houses in a parish: and there “ will be no necessity for any particular place being set apart for the worship “ of God at all: since every man who has three or four in family, may in “ consequence of his being chosen their spiritual instructor, set up a “ Church

In the infancy of Christianity, and at its earliest periods, when as yet public permission and the countenance of authority were not in its favour, the only Churches that in any sense there could be, were congregations of devout Christians, who assembled for divine service, in private houses; and that too not altogether for fitness, but for safety.—Of these, the first consisted of Apostles, with the former disciples, and other believers;—in due time came the Apostles' successors,—Bishops, with Priests, Deacons, and their followers.—Churches of any other kind there could be none, till Christianity had gained some consistency amidst the habits of mankind, so as to require them. And in whatever sense the word Church may be used in the New Testament, it is evident that the regular and formal appointment of a national Church never could be coeval with the gradual formation of Christ's spiritual Church:—and that mate-

“ Church in his own house, independent of any other society of Christians “ whatsoever.” We may carry the argument even farther, and suppose a family still more divided; so as that there should be as many Churches within the same house, as there are parties of three or four to form them.—In short, upon these principles, what end would there be to the absurdities and vagaries of heretical and capricious minds, or to the errors and deceptions of the unlearned and the interested?—*We have not so learned Christ.*—See Dr. SMITH's *Churchman's Answer to the Protestant Dissenter's Catechism*;—printed for RIVINGTON.

rial

rial Churches, or Church Edifices, must have been subsequent to the circumstances which gave occasion for them.—Indeed, instituted Churches, like our own, were then also somewhat the less necessary ;—while the miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit continued to supply the want of national institution.—But in a maturer age, when Christianity had become national, especially when the Empire had become Christian, and the effects of the Holy Spirit less conspicuous, then, indeed, what the Church either could not, or dared not, do before, was with all alacrity performed ;—temples were in all places erected ; splendid edifices, with costly ornaments and apparatus proper for such purposes, were consecrated to Christian services, and kept sequestered from profane uses.—Christianity became then also the religion of the state ; its support liberally provided for by lands, and other sources of perpetual revenue ; its ministers legally appointed, and authoritatively set apart for their holy offices ; and its profession gradually became invested with the form of what we call Establishment.—Kings became its nursing fathers, and Queens its nursing mothers.

On such principles as these, do we, as Christian Ministers, cordially take our part,
under

under our Diocesan, in the completion of this day's undertaking:—that by a legal dedication of this spacious edifice to God's service, by a solemn consecration of all that is essential to a material Church, after a practice as ancient as the nature of a progressive spiritual Church would allow, an Episcopal Church of Christ may here at all times be assembled;—good men here have the benefit of frequent intercourse with their Creator;—learn here the various duties of their respective situations; be here instructed in the proper objects and materials of their faith, their prayers, and their thanksgivings, and that from hence the securest principles of genuine Christianity may be transmitted to succeeding generations.

Do ye ask us, Where we look for these, and where we find them?—Do ye ask, within what form of religious government and persuasion the solemnity of this day includes and sanctifies these walls?—To our Bible we refer you;—to our Bible diligently considered, soberly explained;—not argued away by cavilling evasion, and disingenuous sophistry.—To the plain interpretation of plain dealing, plain writing, unsuspecting witnesses;—authors and authorities not to be called in question; to these do we refer ye, for the sources
of

of our persuasions, our only infallible directors. For the compendious and systematic arrangement of our tenets, we refer you to our Creeds and Articles, in conformity to the holy Scriptures:—and for principles of external regulation,—for the human and discretionary means of executing Christ's commission upon earth, we refer you to the well known Rites, Ceremonies, and Liturgy of our Church, as by law established, under the apostolical administration of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. —These are our mysteries; into these are gladly granted you this day, the privileges of initiation.—We teach you here how to acknowledge God, as the Father, in his capacity of Creator;—God, as in Christ, the Son, in his capacity of Redeemer;—God, as the Holy Spirit, animating you in all good purposes, and supporting your religious faith and practice.—We let you here into the secret, how truly to appreciate the things of this world;—how to pass with comfort and security through this world; and we conduct you, when this world shall be no more, to a world of happiness and immortality hereafter: we teach you how to disencumber yourselves of those worst parts of your composition, lusts and passions;—how to purify your better principles into a
resemblance

resemblance of the holiest spirits: we shew you what you have lost in Adam;—we instruct you what you have regained by Christ; we admit you into his name by baptism, and we supply you with the memorials of his death, at his holy table,—as the means of grace, and as appointed instruments of God unto eternal life.

My Brethren, such, briefly delineated, is the system into which the ceremony of this day receives, and consecrates your pious performances.—The condition, and security which ye possess, for the obtaining to yourselves these blessings, the text teaches you to be, on your part, such a conformity of design, such an unity of will, and faith, and worship, as becomes the followers of an undivided Christ,—fellow-heirs of the same promises; fellow-servants of the same master; doubting not, but where application is made to Him, and to the Father in his name, there is He virtually in the midst of his united worshippers;—by his power present to assist, and ready as effectually as if visibly, to convey all the benefits of his institution, all the means of happiness and salvation through him.—Present doubtless will He at all times be in this sense to you:—present doubtless is he now among us, and we trust approving by his Spirit,

Spirit, what we at this time piously perform, in gratitude to Him,—for his and for his Father's glory.

For the advantages of a communion under these assurances, let me exhort you, as ye have brought, so also to preserve, willing minds, and grateful dispositions.—Be it your care studiously to pursue your religious interests in the way wherein God hath directed you;—and in humility of spirit to follow cautiously, but not blindly and implicitly, the road marked out for your proceedings.—Christianity, that is, the Bible, fears not your perusal: it even courts your investigation.—'Tis not our practice, nor is it our wish, to shut the sacred page against you.—We only recommend to you a sober examination of its contents: we only bid you to weigh well what, upon the whole, the doctrines it contains amount to: not to judge of these by detached parts and unconnected portions, but by the consistent tendency of the whole; and that in conformity with what has always been esteemed to be ordinary prudence, and and is always practised as worldly wisdom,—in obscurer cases, ye will seek for information there, where from leisure, and profession, study, inclination, and other circumstances, you are most likely to obtain the surest.

3.—You

3.—You will now grant me the indulgence of a few minutes for a more particular address to those, whose zeal has stood the foremost in the present most religious undertaking.—And first, let me express the satisfaction which I feel in common, no doubt, with all who now surround me, in contemplating the pleasing circumstances of this day;—especially, when compelled to put in contrast with them sentiments of a very different, and even a very melancholy, description.

Reflect only, what has been the history of some years past, as to religious matters, and consider the activity, with which attempts were made to disunite the established principles of happiness, humanity, and society; and to introduce among us all the diabolical propensities of Atheism, Anarchy, and Sin.—Remember the artful machinations, the wide extended contrivances, which the patrons and artificers of infidelity have had recourse to, for the purpose of diminishing the influence of Christianity, and of effacing, if it were possible, all veneration and regard for it, from the minds of their fellow creatures.—The malignity of the design has indeed been in great measure counteracted by the workings of a kind providence, and by the industry of those who have employed themselves in better purposes,—

purposes,—for the support of Christianity among us.—Still however, much remains to be effected ;—and we justly congratulate ourselves this day, on the creditable assurance you afford the Christian world, that great and indefatigable as were the labours of the enemy to seduce you, you have had virtue and good sense sufficient to escape the snare ; and that instead of abandoning the Christian faith, we behold this public testimony of your belief in Christ, and of your adherence to the principles of Revealed Religion.—We welcome this, both as a token of God's goodness in respect to you, and as a symptom of imbecility in our adversaries, favourable to the wishes of all good men and Christians.

And thus much for ourselves in this country.—Allow me now to go one step farther, and lead you to a remembrance of that wicked conspiracy against all religion, which has so fatally displayed itself in an adjoining country.—Let me inform you, that instead of building Churches for God's worship, instead of consecrating new places for the support of the Christian faith, the most wanton and malicious delight has been employed in defiling and destroying those which had been set apart for sacred purposes.—And it is a fact notorious, but well attested, that in some of the most populous

populous cities, where but of late many places for public worship did exist, in some not one is to be found ;—in others, perhaps one may have been preserved in gracious condescension of the rulers to the *prejudice* and *superstition* of the people ;—which are the terms, by which they stigmatize Christianity :—in some, the most superb and splendid structures of antiquity have been sold for not a tenth of what, I am informed, this building has cost you, but with the express condition that they should be destroyed, and the materials applied to other uses.

My good Brethren, think not I record these particulars, but with a view of acknowledging your pious reverse of conduct.—While they have been employed in pulling down, you have been engaged in building up ;—while they have turned away from seeking God, you have exercised your hearts in his most righteous cause, and have converted to his honour those honest profits of your industry, which the providence of God has seen fit to bestow upon you.

I leave these considerations upon your thoughts, and shall only add to them two short reflections.

First then, let it not be matter of surprise to you, that such proceedings as I have just referred

referred to, should be permitted hitherto. "*Deus patiens, quia æternus est,*" is a well known maxim. God suffers long, because he is eternal. The Almighty can afford to wait for times and seasons to accomplish his designs;—because his existence comprehends all times and seasons.—Let it rather be remembered that fallings off from the Christian faith have been foretold;—and that these go into the very evidences of Christianity; so as instead of furnishing arguments against it, in reality to prove it true.—God may yet have a strange reverse of circumstances to accomplish; and perhaps sagacious minds may already perceive symptoms of hope and promise.

The last thing to be remembered, is, that whatever has been attempted or effected against the establishment of Christianity elsewhere, is as perfectly distinct from any impression on Christianity itself, as any thing the most remote from, and in its own nature unconnected with it.—The profanation of sacred edifices, the pulling down of Churches; the destruction of some unhappy ministers of Christianity, the sending away of others into banishment, and the like, touch not the question of Christ's word, nor the truth of his declarations, nor the great arguments of the Christian faith,—miraculous powers, and prophecy.—

phesy.—The truth is, they prove nothing more than politics and political convulsion.—Men were to be sapped in their religious principles, and to be deprived of all pious restraint, and Christian scrupulosity, else they were unfit for the bold designs of ambitious, political projectors.—This is the true explanation of that mystery:—and for the credit of Christianity we remark it.

Your purpose also is most creditable to yourselves; and blessings will no doubt descend upon you, from the defence you have erected for that faith, in support of which, the religious sentiments of your hearts are this day ratified, and legally completed.

May God with approbation behold from heaven, and prosper you;—may also his Christianity, as we have no doubt it will do, baffle all the machinations of its enemies to destroy it;—rise, and be renewed out of the flames which were intended to consume it, and in event, from all its trials, prove itself only the more pure, as gold comes purer from the refiner's fire.

FINIS.

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